
UNIT 14: FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ETHNOGRAPHY*

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the impact of feminist thought on ethnographic research;
- identify the key authors and texts that contributed to feminist ethnography;
- discuss the strengths and limitations of the feminist approach; and
- identify major areas of inquiry in which feminist scholars are currently engaged.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The feminist movement and feminist thought have made an extraordinary impact in the social sciences and humanities over the past half a century. Feminism which has its focus the subordination of women by men, has a history of over two centuries; Mary Wollestonecraft's pioneering work 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' is viewed as a foundational text of "First wave" or 'Suffragette feminism' in Europe in which women for the first time organized themselves politically demanding the right to vote. Feminism has been broadly categorized into 'liberal', marxist' and 'socialist' feminism. While it is not within the scope of this unit to map the trajectories of these various viewpoints, it may be noted that the underlying core of all these approaches is to bring to the centre stage women's experiences

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in all walks of life; from the secluded, secret 'private' sphere to the more visible 'public' one. While liberal feminism advocates for reforms in the system and the promotion of practices and policies that will promote gender equality, Marxist and Socialist or Radical approaches view the system itself as fundamentally flawed and unequal and therefore advocate radical structural changes and an overhauling of social institutions so that they do not discriminate against women. The so called 'Second Wave' of feminism, which began in the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S.A. and Europe, saw an intense upsurge in feminist mobilising, activism and writing, including in the social sciences. Large numbers of women entered universities and very soon began to realize that in many areas of social thought history was either assumed to be 'male', with women confined to domestic spaces, or gender issues were simply regarded as unimportant or irrelevant. This 'androcentric' bias was also experienced by students of anthropology which is itself described as 'the science of Man'! Despite the long-standing interest of anthropologists and sociologists in kinship and family, the focus was the male and issues related to descent, property, political organisation based on kinship. For instance, Claude Levi-Strauss's 'alliance theory' views women merely as the conduits or messages exchanged by different groups of men. Women ethnographers like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict published very popular ethnographic texts, however their work was viewed very condescendingly and critically by dominant men of the British school of social anthropology who thought it was unscientific, impressionistic and frivolous. It was observed by feminist scholars that much of the information and ethnographic accounts on the lives and experiences of women were often, in reality reports of male informants transmitted through male ethnographers. In the 1960s and 1970s therefore, feminists set out to correct the 'male' bias in societies they studied. They argued that the field had been dominated by male researchers and was full of male stereotypes and androcentric frameworks for the analysis of cultures.

In the following sections, we map the emergence and growth of feminist theorizing and methodology from the early beginnings to the contemporary period. We shall examine some of the crucial methodological and substantive debates that feminism engendered and will elaborate some of the areas of inquiry and research in which feminist anthropologists are currently engaged. It will become clear to you that gender, is today regarded as a central, fundamental category. Without a gender perspective, attempts to understand and analyse society and culture will be incomplete, inadequate and uni-dimensional. Gender is recognized as being central to the analysis of structures of power, the organization of social and cultural institutions and mode of ideological control across cultures. Feminist ethnographers have played an important role in bringing this issue to the forefront.

14.2 EARLY INFLUENCES

Ellen Lewin (2006) mentions the work of some brave and pioneering women, many of whom remained unknown and unrecognized. Prominent amongst them is Elsie Clews Parson (1875-1941) a political radical and outspoken feminist, who made use of her personal wealth to offer financial support to younger scholars in an era before public funding for field research had been

institutionalized. Ruth Benedict was one of the beneficiaries of Parsons' generosity. Parsons completed her doctorate in Sociology from Columbia University in 1899, but moved to anthropology under the influence of scholars like Kroeber, Lowie, Sapir, Boas and others when she was in her 40s. She travelled with male colleagues to the American southwest, thus breaking social barriers against men and women working together. Her best known work is 'Pueblo Indian Religion' (1939) a descriptive and comparative work whose constant theme is culture change.

Zora Neale Thurston was another early pioneer mentioned by Lewin (ibid.). She was an African-American woman who studied at Columbia University under Franz Boas. She experimented with several narrative forms and moved freely between academic and creative writing. Daisy Bates, a little-known fieldworker who for several decades lived near the Australian aborigines, is said to have provided A.R Radcliffe-Brown with much of the data that he later claimed as his own.

Within British Social Anthropology, Phyllis Kaberry, a student of Malinowski, was recognized as a pioneer of ethnographic research on women in specific social and political contexts. In 1939, she wrote "Aboriginal women: Sacred and Profane" which examined the rich but separate ritual experiences of Aboriginal Women. "Woman of the Grassfields" (1952) is a significant study on woman's work and economic life in the British Cameroons. This work is a precursor to the vast body of interdisciplinary literature on women and development that followed from the 1970's onwards which examined the nature of women's work across cultures and the impact of male-centric developmental plans and policies on their lives. Another leading figure in British Social Anthropology was Audrey Richards (1899 - 1984). Her work, spanning over 50 years, covered areas like Kinship, nutrition, fertility, labour and migration. An Africanist, she conducted fieldwork in the 1930s and 1950s in Uganda and Zambia. Her well known study "Land, Labour and Diet" (1939) examines the manner in which the Bemba community manage scarce resources and the acute problems faced by Bemba women in doing contingency planning during periods of food shortage. Her most famous work 'Chisungu' (1956) examines female initiation rites among the Bemba of Zambia; and the various secret rituals and practices that signal their passage into adulthood and responsibility.

An interesting source of influential writings identified by Lewin (2006) is the work of the 'unsung heroines' – the wives of anthropologists. Some of these women facilitated the work of their husbands; others created their own genre. Lewin (ibid) cites, among others, Elizabeth Fernea's 1965 work "Guests of the Sheik" which was the result of her being with her anthropologist husband in the field in Southern Iraq, helping him gather information about the women. Similarly, Margery Wolf's classic ethnography "The House of Lim" (1968) was written because she had accompanied her husband to Northern Taiwan to conduct fieldwork. Some other highly influential use of life histories included Mary F. Swirth's "Baba of Karo" (1954) and Marjorie Shostak's "Nisa: the life and words of Kung German !

This section has highlighted the significant contributions of women ethnographers in bringing women's issues to scrutiny. However, barring some notable exceptions, the disciplines of sociology and anthropology

were dominated by men. Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) and Margaret Mead (1901-78) were two such figures who attracted wide-spread interest from academic and lay readers alike. Some of their works were indeed "best sellers". Their work drew upon comparisons between the United States and the non-Western world; they made their American readers aware of the vast differences that exist across cultures in "appropriate" male and female behavior, child rearing practices and attitudes towards sexuality.

Benedict's fieldwork with Native Americans and other groups lead her to develop the "configurational approach" to culture wherein culture is viewed as "personality writ large", facilitating and constraining different personality types in different societies. Gender is a crucial dimension of personality and culture and the enactment of gender roles is also culturally conditioned. Mead also examined the influence of culture on human social development. Her landmark work "Coming of Age in Samoa" (1928) and later. "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies" (1935) demonstrate how culture is the primary factor in determining masculine and feminine characteristics and behavior. "Coming of Age in Samoa" created a sensation in the USA as it dwelt upon the very different manner in which young men and women in Samoa experienced adolescence and adulthood as a consequence of their "permissive" and relaxed attitudes towards sexuality and intimacy. The works of Benedict and Mead focused upon so-called "soft" areas like child rearing practices and gender socialization and tended to be highly impressionistic in nature. This did not go down well with the British Social Anthropologists who were immersed in the study of "hard" areas like Kinship and political organization. However, the visibility, popularity and high academic stature attained by Benedict and Mead made it possible for women anthropologists to make their presence felt in the years to come. The next section will discuss the emergence of "feminist anthropology" as a distinctive development and highlight some of the key texts and authors that made valuable contributions.

14.3 THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY

Feminist anthropology emerged in the Western Universities in the 1970s. Sally Slocum's (1970) paper, "Woman the Gatherer: The Male Bias in Anthropology" presented at the annual meet of the American Anthropological Association critiqued the popular conception of "man the Hunter" and posed a challenge to the male dominated academic thinking regarding the roles of men and women and the evolutionary history of the species.

1970 also saw the publication of Peggy Golde's edited volume "Women in the Field" This path-breaking collection of essays by women fieldworkers, opened up the question of how being a woman affected the experiences of anthropologists conducting their research in diverse settings and periods.

Two of the most significant volumes published during the 1970s which virtually defined the field of feminist anthropology were "Women, Culture and Society" (1974) edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Lousie Lamphere and "Toward an Anthropology of Women" (1975) edited by Rayna Reiter (later known as Rayna Rapp).

Rosaldo and Lamphere's volume was based upon the premise that relations between men and women were asymmetrical across cultures and societies. They write: "Everywhere we find that women are excluded from certain economic or political activities, that their roles wives and mothers are associated with fewer powers and prerogatives than are the roles of men. It seems fair to say then, that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is a universal fact of human social life". (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974:1)

Women tend to be subordinated because of their confinement to the domestic or private domain. Men, on the other hand dominate in the public domain and thus have greater access and control over economic, political and social resources.

Sherry Ortner's highly influential piece "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" looked at symbolic constructions of women as the key to understanding their secondary status. Because women are connected with 'natural' functions like pregnancy, lactation and child rearing they are seen on a lower plane than men who control the 'cultural' realm; Culture is always viewed as superior to Nature.

Rayna Reiter's volume was also inspired by the emerging feminist movement. One of the important papers in the volume is Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex". Rubin elaborates upon the "sex/gender system" in which the biological category, 'female' is transformed into the socio-cultural category 'woman' While 'sex' is a biological or physiological given 'gender' emerges when bodily characteristics are given cultural meanings and significance. It is thus socially constructed and constituted.

By placing women at the centre of analysis feminist anthropologists were able to arrive at very different results from those of traditional male-centred studies. Annette Wiener's famous re-study of the Trobriand Islands for example, in which she revisited the site of Malinowski's classic work and actually incorporated women's voices in her ethnography, showed us a different picture of the Trobrianders than the one painted by him.

To sum up, the period of the 1970s and 1980s saw debates over domestic/public and nature/culture dichotomies, recognising universal sexual asymmetry and "women" as a universal category. The political goal of uniting women across nations and cultures was the hallmark of the feminist movement. Women, it was believed should strive together to fight the common experience of discrimination. However, scholars also argued that these conceptions were "western" ones; rooted in European and American history and culture, in other words, they were shaped and structured by specific socio-cultural contexts. Could these concepts be used uncritically in other cultural contexts without distorting the understanding of gender relations in other cultures? Would these concepts misrepresent different experiences and realities?

It is this "essentialising" and "totalizing" tendency in feminism that was critiqued and questioned by several social scientists. They argued that the category of "woman" that was discussed by feminists, actually referred to

White, Western/middle class women and failed to account for the diversities of race, ethnicity, caste, class etc. Non-western social scientists have strongly criticized the ethnographic bias of western feminist scholars in their studies and interpretations of other cultures. Some have also raised the issue of unequal structures of power which continue to dictate the research activities; those who are studied are mostly from other cultures and those who study and write are mostly Western women (Abu-Lugodh 1990). Even in the case of 'native' researchers studying their own culture, the western-centric concepts and theories of academic social science creates a hierarchy of knowledge between the scholar/researcher and the subjects of study.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s scholars of gender broadened their concerns from women's experiences per se to the ways in which gender and other analytical categories (race, caste, class, ethnicity etc.) meet and interact under varying material and cultural conditions. For example, in the Indian context, we can see quite clearly how difficult it is to separate gender, caste and class; the intersecting of these categories shapes women's experiences and degree of marginalization. Thus we can speak of Dalit women as being "thrice marginalized" on account of their position in caste, class and gender hierarchies

An extremely important contribution of feminism in general and feminist ethnography in particular has been in the domain of methodology and the manner in which we do field work. The following section will elaborate upon this.

14.4 FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

14.4.1 Feminism and Positivism

One of the major challenges posed by feminists to mainstream science and social science (also designated as 'male stream' by some writers) has been its critique of positivism. Early social sciences (including sociology and anthropology) were modelled on the 'positivist' tenets or principles of value-free objectivity. Positivity science aims at the collection of "facts" and "truth". Research must be replicable and have validity and reliability. This view of science implies a certain hierarchical distance between the researcher (the scientist) and the subjects of research (the lay persons). The researcher is expected to keep a certain objective, analytical distance from the "subjects" so that he/she can objectively see, judge and interpret the life and meanings of the subjects. In the case of ethnographic research, in which researchers "go out into the field", learn the local language and live in the community for an extended period, they are cautioned not to 'go native' or identify themselves so completely with their subjects that they forget the 'aims and objectives' of their research.

This positivist paradigm is in sharp contrast to the way in which feminist research has been described: "contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant,complete but not necessarily replicable, inclusive of emotions and events as experienced". (Nielsen, 1990:6)

According to Diane Wolf (1996) feminist critiques of positivism have been located in three major areas: i) philosophical critiques of positivism and its pretense of value free science;

- ii) moral critiques of objectifications and exploitation of subjects;
- iii) practical critiques of the way positivism opposes the interest of the researcher and the researched.

Feminists (and others) argue that the requirement of 'objectivity' and 'value-neutrality' is not only impossible, but also undesirable. The hierarchical relationships between researcher and subject reflect male forms of interpersonal dynamics – men are expected to be 'rational', unemotional and business like in their work- indeed, Pat Caplan (1988, c.f. Wolf 1996) suggests that 'objectivity' is simply a form of 'male subjectivity'.

Feminist scholars engaged in qualitative fieldwork traditions like ethnography have encouraged relationships between the researcher and researched that are based on friendship, trust, intimacy and closeness rather than a cultivated "distance". This is expected to make it possible for a deeper, richer more nuanced picture of respondents' lives to emerge. Some feminist researchers have experimented with different forms of writing in order to depict women's experiences in a richer, more meaningful way. Some use the device of 'auto-ethnography' and place themselves within the narrative detailing their own experiences and emotions rather than writing 'outside' the account. The term "inter subjectivity" has been used to describe a two-way relationship between researcher and 'subjects' wherein the researcher compares her work with her own experiences as a woman and scientist and shares it with her subjects who then add their opinion. This not only challenges the splitting of researcher and researched and of subject and object but also encourages the researcher to put herself into the research and writing as part of the experience (Duelli Klein, 1983: cited in Wolf, 1996).

14.4.2 Feminists and Fieldwork

Feminists have reflected extensively upon the dynamics of fieldwork. We have earlier made reference to Peggy Golde's (1970) anthology of fieldwork experiences of women scholars. Other important and frequently cited collections dealing with fieldwork experiences and dilemmas include Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai's edited volume 'Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History', (1992) Joyce Nielson's edited volume 'Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in Social Science' (1990) Kamala Visweswaran's 'Fictions of Feminist Ethnography' (1974) and Diane Wolf's edited volume 'Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork' (1996) In the Indian context, the classic 1979 volume 'The Fieldworker and the Field' edited by M N Srinivas et al has chapters dealing with the issue of gender, positionality and fieldwork.

There are several accounts of the difficulties faced by women researchers in alien settings where the freedom of dress, movement and expression is severely curtailed. How feminist researchers have to negotiate and sometimes submit to patriarchal pressures makes for very interesting reading. For instance, while conducting research amongst the Bedouin in Saudi Arabia Lila Abu-Lugodh (1986) had to live like a Bedouin daughter and conform more strictly to their gender norms than the other young women of the community. This process of 'immersion' enables the researcher to gain a perspective on the culture from 'within', and sometimes position her differently from a more distant 'participant observer'. Feminist ethnographers have reflected upon

their 'positionality' and attempted to share and compare their experiences with their respondents. They use ethnography as a means to uncover the intimate, day-to-day lived experiences of women across races, ethnicities, caste and class.

At the same time, there have been several critiques both from outside and within the feminist movement which have made them constantly question and reflect upon their ideas and practices. The inherent power relationship that characterizes the fieldwork experience is one such issue. Friendship, intimacy, sharing between researcher and researched can also be exploitative. Kum Kum Bhavnani (1988, cited in Wolf 1996) argues that these power relations are hidden because the researcher's power is often transparent and unspoken. Yet, she makes decisions right from conceptualization to writing about the 'subjects' and eventually withdraws from the field back into her 'own' world of prestige and privilege. Judith Stacey's (1991) classic piece 'Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?' makes the point that the closeness and intimacy feminist researchers seek may actually be more harmful than 'objectivity'. The tragedies and crises in the lives of subjects often end up being 'data' for the researcher leading to a sense of betrayal for the subject and guilt for the researcher. For example, a researcher may learn many intimate family secrets by cultivating friendships with respondents. If she uses the information for her own research purposes, she may harm the subjects. Feminists have contributed to the literature on research ethics, human rights, informed consent and privacy issues through critical examinations of their own practices. Daphne Patai (1991) asks the important question: Is it possible to write about the oppressed without becoming one of the oppressors?" (cited in Wolf 1996:21). The question is still open to debate. In the next section, we will briefly review some of the areas that have attracted the attention and engagement of feminist scholars. We draw upon Ellen Lewin's (2006) review of feminist anthropology for this purpose.

14.4.3 Contemporary Issues and Concerns

'Gender' is considered an important, significant area of research and specialization and all important academic journals and publications- both national and international- publish papers and articles with gender as their major analytic focus. Large numbers of books are published and it has become a very difficult task to keep updated with all the latest publications and researches in the area some of the important areas of research and engagement have been briefly summarized below.

14.4.4 Development and Social Change:

Feminist sociologists and anthropologists are studying the ways in which gender influences economic development, migration, nationalisms, and the roles and priorities of contemporary nation states in influencing the lives of women and men. Some of the themes are: the transnational circulation of people and information and the resultant impact on gender patterns; multinational commerce and the gendered movement of workers into global marketplaces; changing political and economic realities and their impact upon social and cultural institutions; the gendered assumptions underlying international developmental projects and their outcomes for both men and women.

14.4.4.1 Motherhood and the Body

How the body particularly the female body is acted upon by cultural, medical, economic and other forces – has become a central theme. Health and illness, pain, spirit possession, sexually transmitted diseases particularly AIDS and violence against the female body have been studied.

Reproductive technologies, diagnostic techniques like amniocentesis and ultrasound for the purpose of sex selection, Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) including surrogacy, ‘renting a womb’, adoption (both national and international) have wide implications for gender relations. In the context of developing countries like India where technologies are readily available but cultural values are still deeply patriarchal, such ethnographies can contribute greatly to our understanding of these complex cultural processes.

Box : 14.2 Leela Dube: An Indian Pioneer

Leela Dube is one of the pioneering women anthropologists in India who has produced extremely detailed and insightful work on gender, family and kinship in India. She was also one of the core members of the Committee on the Status of Women that produced the landmark report “Towards Equality” (1974) that squarely brought out the glaring discriminations and inequalities faced by Indian women quarter of a century after the country’s independence. She was born in 1923 in an upper middle-class Maharashtrian family which valued and promoted education for girls yet still believed that marriage was their ultimate destination. She broke with tradition and had chose her spouse outside her community when she married the noted anthropologist Shyama Charan Dube. S.C. Dube inducted his wife into the discipline of anthropology and continued to be a source of guidance throughout their life together. Leela Dube’s anthropological work began with her doctoral study of the Gond Community in Central India, with a particular focus on Gond women. This was the beginning of a life long engagement with issues of gender, caste, kinship. Her detailed ethnographic work brought alive the world of interpersonal and familiar relationships and the ‘lived realities’ of women’s experiences. She also wrote reflexively about her positionality as a scholar, wife of a distinguished anthropologist and a ‘dutiful’ housewife, daughter-in-law and mother and how it impacted her anthropological work. She actively engaged with the emerging literature feminist anthropology bringing these perspectives to bear in her own detailed examinations of structure, culture and agency.

The experience of motherhood cross-culturally has always been a focus of interest. This has been taken further by scholars like Rayna Rapp, Faye Ginsburg and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. The physical, mental and emotional ‘reproductive labour’ that women engage in to bear and raise their children has been explored in detail. An important contribution is the acknowledgement of how inequality between races, classes, ethnicities and castes shapes the experience of motherhood.

14.4.4.2 Knowledge and Representation:

In the earlier section on feminist methodology, we examined some of the critical questions raised on issues of research, positionality and power relations. Feminists have raised the issue of ‘insider’ research, contending

that insightful and valuable research can and should be done by those who belong to the community/group that they wish to study. This is known as 'positionality'.

14.4.4.3 Contemporary Issues

Different dimensions of gender experience have been explored. The study of men and masculinities has become an important area of inquiry. How is male dominance constructed and enacted? How is masculine identity acquired? These inquiries challenge entrenched assumptions about gender stratification. 'Lesbian and gay' or 'queer' anthropology directly drew inspiration from feminist anthropology. Studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender phenomena depend upon understandings about sex, gender, embodiment and identify which are at the core of the feminist inquiry.

Check Your Progress:

- 1) On the basis of fieldwork by Benedict's with Native Americans and other groups lead her to develop the.....
- 2) The termhas been used to describe a two-way relationship between researcher and 'subjects'.

14.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has attempted to bring out the impact of feminist theory and practice on ethnography. Feminists pointed the androcentric bias and male-centred ethos. While a number of outstanding women ethnographers including Benedict, Mead, Richards and Kaberry did make their mark, it was not until the Second Wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s that large numbers of enthusiastic feminist scholars made inroads into anthropology and sociology and changed them forever. Feminist methodology which rejected positivism and celebrated friendship, sharing of experience and breaking down the hierarchy of research relationships brought a new perspective in ethnographic research. These interventions in matters of theory and methodology made the field stronger and more rigorous. 'Gender' has become a critical focus of social science inquiry and ethnographic research, and feminist critiques of the ways of doing ethnography have played an important role in bringing about change.

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14.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Configurational approach
2. Inter - subjectivity

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THE PEOPLE'S
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